



Consequences and Implications of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative on Maritime Security in the South China Sea

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Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a trade policy implemented by the People's Republic of China (PRC), sometimes known as the New Silk Road is a global infrastructure development policy in which the PRC has invested millions in over 150 countries and countless international organisations. The BRI consists of six major land trade corridors which are linked by the means of road, rail and energy infrastructure and a Maritime Silk Road which is connected by the development of ports across key positions which are used for both commercial and militaristic purposes. This is important because maintaining a strong maritime presence is essential for the PRC considering its growing interests in the South China Sea region. The BRI is considered the cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy and trade policy, the main objective of this policy being, of course, trade development but it is also to gain political leverage in the countries where it builds its massive infrastructure projects.

Consequences and Implications on Maritime Security

While analysing the implications for Maritime Security in the South China Sea due to the BRI we can look at two different types of security concerns present, non-traditional concerns such as destruction of local environment, resource pressure and effects on local fishery economy, and strategic concerns such as the political leverage given to the PRC in the matter through the means of BRI and potential threats to sovereignty of other states in the region who are also claimants of the South China Sea.

An estimated of 21% of all global trade passes through the South China Sea, which when put in numbers is equivalent to \$3.4 trillion as of 2016 making this region not only of importance to the PRC and its neighbours but also to non-regional actors such the United States, Japan, South Korea and pretty much every major economic hub in the world, but for the PRC, the South China Sea represents a lot more. 67% of all Chinese trade passes through this region, being the economic powerhouse that the PRC is, this 67% is a lot more than just a number, it presents the years of work the Chinese Communist Party has put into bringing the PRC from one of the most economically backward states to its current state. To understand the importance of the South China Sea region and look at the implications it causes on maritime security we first need to look at the PRC.

From 1927 to 1949 the Red Army fought and fought hard for the establishment of the PRC, led by a strong leader who had formed a cult of personality around him Mao Zedong initiated the cultural revolution in 60's which was aimed at transforming the country from an agriculture-based economy to an industrial one but failed and instead degraded both agricultural and industrial sectors. In the 70's in an attempt to recover from the revolution the PRC had to adopt what I would call heavily Realist policies as these policies introduced by Deng Xiaoping, the successor of Mao Zedong, were solely focused on one thing and that was Chinese development and this obvious because of the 9.8% growth in annual gross domestic product the

PRC has seen since 1979 but to achieve this level of growth the PRC had to use some radical methods such as state-sponsored censorship. This Realist ideology that was implemented by Deng was followed upon by Xi Jinping but with less of an economic perspective and more of a political overlay with him declaring that his goal was the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. This explains the Realist ideologies that are present in the PRC even do this day whether it be the denial in allegations of an uprising in the Xijiang as not to legitimise it or the concept of Panda diplomacy.

Now that we understand Chinese policies, we can look at the implications it has on the South China Sea.

Non-Traditional Maritime Security Implications

In the coastal regions surrounding the South China Sea are small communities who have made their livelihood by extracting the resources from the South China Sea; they have done so long before any geopolitical tensions rocked the region. Nearly 77% of those communities rely on the region’s rich aquatic resources for their protein intake and livelihood, that is equivalent to 190 million people who rely on the region for their survival. The PRC knows this very well and have implemented what experts call “gunboat diplomacy”, when looking at it from a national security level perspective we might be prone to ignore it as simply “hostile actions” but when looking at it from the perspective of local fishers we start to see the real problem. In 2019, a Philippine boat anchored at Reed Bank was rammed and sunk by a Chinese vessel, the region in which the boat was sunk is claimed by the PRC under its 9-dash line claim but in a 2016 arbitration ruled that the region was part of the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone (EEZ). More recently on 19th August 2019, another collision occurred around 140 km west of the Philippine Island of Palawan.

An important aspect of the BRI is the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) which is connected by a complex system of ports spread across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), these ports are used for a combination of militaristic and commercial aspects. The ships from these ports headed to the PRC must pass the South China Sea, now we start to see the security implications of the BRI for the South China Sea. With the MSR, the Chinese paramountcy over the South China Sea is imperative, now you might ask how targeting the locals of the region help the PRC. I would argue that these are strategic moves which are done as a show of power, the aim of the PRC is not to affect the locals but to scare them so that they do not extract the resources of what the PRC think is their part of the South China Sea. The collisions of Chinese and Philippine military vessels is the PRCs way to showcase their naval strength and deter any Philippine naval action in the region. In the process of doing this the PRC has inevitably negatively affected the local fishery economy and local communities.

Strategic Maritime Security Implications

For the states present in the South China Sea damage to the fishery economy and local coastal communities is a major concern, the major concern for these states is what the Chinese claim of the region represents, territorial encroachment. There are three main territorial land disputes in the South China Sea region a) The Paracel Island claimed by the PRC and Vietnam; b) The Spratly Islands claimed by the PRC, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam; c) The



Scarborough Shoal claimed by the PRC and the Philippines. The BRI has brought the states in the region closer to each other by economic integration, this is the most important security implication. The economic integration of the states in the region means that it is imperative that they can balance territorial sovereignty with economic development. An important event that the states have taken note of is the Sri Lankan handover of the Hambantota port to the PRC for a 99-year lease following them unable to pay its debts to the Chinese firms, after this handover the PRC gained a strategic position in the IOR and by extension the South China Sea. One might ask why the states in the region need to be so dependent on the PRC for economic development, the simple answer to this is competence. Many states in the region are incompetent to fill in the infrastructure gaps either due to financial restrictions or lack of technical knowledge. It is here that we can see the biggest threat to security that is present, interdependence. Southeast Asia's largest economy, Indonesia has been trying to attract investors for its \$450 billion infrastructure project to drive economic growth. The PRC has, for now, invested the largest amount in this project by giving \$130 billion. Similarly, Thailand is also pushing for the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) which is aimed at extending Thailand's seaboard and its economic zone making it leading in the ASEAN, in 2016 Thailand agreed to this project being linked to the BRI which would give it access to a vault of funding. I would say this is the PRCs aim, complex economic integration and interdependence used as political leverage in the South China Sea area. The PRCs aim is to make the states in the region so dependent on the infrastructure projects funded by the BRI that if they do oppose the Chinese claim in the South China Sea the infrastructure project is used as leverage to gain support.

The South China Sea region is home to nearly 7% of the world's population, nearly 21% of all world trade passes through this region, that is equivalent to nearly \$3.4 trillion as of 2016. The importance of the South China Sea to the international economy cannot be overstated. With the introduction of the BRI the economic importance of the South China Sea has increased three-fold, and this has also put the security of the region in threat as well. With aggressive Chinese actions in the region such as attacking Philippine vessels and building artificial islands near the Spratly Islands are just catalysts for the tensions. Other indirectly related conflicts such as China-Taiwan also have an immense impact on the security of the region, this is because the BRI has brought this region into the international spotlight. A conflict in this region would invite world powers such as Russia and USA as well, as the region has economic importance for pretty much every major power.

Causes of Consequences and Implications

Knowing now the implications and consequences of the BRI on the South China Sea Region we can now look at the reasons for these consequences. The ship collisions, aggressive artificial island building and many more are not mere instances of accidents but a well-planned strategy. The PRC has by far the most superior naval force in all of the South China Sea region, the PRC has tried to establish itself in the region long before the geopolitical tensions rose, in 1974 they forcibly took the Paracel Islands from South Vietnam using its then insignificant navy. The operation that took over the Paracel Island was overseen by Deng Xiaoping, who I would say is the architect of contemporary Chinese foreign policy. Deng knew about the navy's deficiencies, having already brought many Realist policies in the economic front he knew it that having strong economic relations would only give a limited amount of soft power but to be able



to become a paramount power in the region the PRC would need to have a strong militaristic presence as well. It is here that many experts have disagreements as to whether Deng's were Realist in nature or Liberalist, some say Deng tried to build a complex system of economic interdependencies and gave corporations a strong standing in the PRC but I say that all of Deng's policies were focused on one thing, Power, consolidating power was the main objective of his policies which is a classic trait of Realism. Deng's policies brought the PRC into an era where every policy; economic, political, militaristic, were all heavily Realist in nature but also recognised the importance of interdependence. In contemporary times, the most well-known of these policies is the BRI which takes interdependence to the next level by connecting the PRC with the rest of the world and this has a strong impact on what happens in the South China Sea.

Conclusion

The BRI defines modern Chinese foreign policy, created from a mix of economic development and strategic military expansion. It has thus emerged as a key player in the modern setting with enormous investments in infrastructure across the world, mainly through the Maritime Silk Road, hence developing a strong foothold in vital regions such as the South China Sea, with huge implications on maritime security. On the one hand, there is the issue of non-traditional security with respect to environmental degradation and disruption of local economies. At the other extreme, the broader strategic implications threaten the sovereignty of neighboring states.

The implications of the BRI in the South China Sea go beyond economic integration. The militarization of the region, as exemplified by China's naval actions and building of artificial islands, speaks to a long-term strategy aimed at consolidating Chinese influence. Thus, China leveraged economic dependence linked to the BRI projects to position itself as an indispensable partner to the region and at the same time created an important tool for its political leverage. It has brought geopolitical tensions to a new height that could involve global powers like the United States and Russia.

To conclude, what the BRI does in the South China Sea is to underline a messy and well-calculated balance between economic diplomacy and hard power projection for the ultimate purpose of reinforcing China's dominance in the region. The development of economic interdependence is no doubt useful to many, but it is crystal clear that the BRI is also serving China as one avenue by which it can assert its territorial ambitions to remodel the geopolitical landscape to suit its geopolitical landscape to suit its goals.